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SAMUEL WENDELL WILLISTON

IN THE SOCIETY OF THE SIGMA XI

By an unhappy stroke of fate, the Society of Sigma Xi shortly after the loss of its founder and first President, Henry Shaler Williams, is also mourning the passing away of its second President, Samuel Wendell Williston on whose strong shoulders fell the major burden of the development and extension of the influence of the organization of the Society when in 1900 Professor Williams practically withdrew from his leading and guiding activities in the Society. The mantle of the founder could have fallen on no more worthy leader: Dr. Williston not only proved to be a vigorous and successful exponent of the importance of the Society as a factor in the life and promise of universities, which led to the establishment of new chapters in a number of the strongest Universities in the country, especially in the western states, but he was no less a champion of the highest ideals of the Society, appealing for the fellowship of investigators in all fields of effort to advance human knowledge by scientific research and emphasizing the importance of positive performance in research.

It was during Dr. Williston's presidency that such important centers of research activities as Leland Stanford University, the University of California, Columbia University, the University of Chicago, the University of Illinois, the Case School of Applied Science and Indiana University organized chapters which have belonged to the most active and productive in the Society. In the founding of these Chapters Dr. Williston was a leading influence, the incentive, the spark for inflaming enthusiastic support of the movement for the establishment of a Chapter coming often directly from his eloquent championship of the latent power of the Society as a nucleus for encouraging research. This debt of the Society to the genius of its second President was impressed on the writer most deeply in connection with the founding of the Chapter in his own institution, the University of Chicago, in 1903.

In his presidential address of 1902 Dr. Williston emphasized what is perhaps today the most important function of Sigma Xi Chapters in University life; the Sigma Xi *brings together* all those diversified research activities which normally pursue their own lines of development in magnificent isolation. The Sigma Xi brings together as no other university agency does the astronomers, biologists, chemists, geologists, physicists, and other scientific men not only with a resultant increase in the understanding and sympathy for the work of their confrères, but often too with instance of such cross-fertilization of fields of thought, which give the strongest promise of original lines of investigation. It is indeed, in this mixing of the scientific trends of thought, in this relaxation from the narrowness of one's own field of effort, in the awakening to the inspiring progress made in other fields that perhaps the very greatest advantage of the establishment of Sigma Xi chapters in research centers is to be found. The importance of the emphasis on this point in Dr. Williston's presidential address of 1902 was recognized by the Society to the extent of the incorporation of its leading passages in the Constitution of the Society in the form of Appendix VI.

In this same address, Dr. Williston insisted on the desirability of having the beneficent influence of the ideals and aims of the Sigma Xi Society brought to bear on students at as early a date as possible, so that this influence might be of real weight and sometimes decisive, in encouraging any natural tendency toward research, indeed in giving birth to the fervor and enthusiasm for the search of new truth. In the long years that followed, Dr. Williston was no less ardent an advocate of this early connection between the Society and the student, but he also came to realize as many of us have done, that to fulfil its real mission, the fostering of research, the Society must put more emphasis in the future on positive achievement, on accomplishment in research, rather than on promise, on a mere interest in research that so often has remained absolutely sterile. Indeed, any one glancing through the pages of our Quarter Century Record and History with a searching, questioning mind, must be impressed by the comparative non-productiveness of a large proportion of our membership. It is a matter of common knowledge too that as yet election to Sigma Xi is not considered so signal an honor—for instance in the case of impartially minded foreigners—as some of us would most ardently desire to see it. Thoughts of this kind underlie the great movement of the last seven or eight years looking toward elevating the standard of membership in the Society, and in this movement Dr. Williston was one of the leaders. The Society faced the continuing vital need of contact with the young undergraduate student at as early a time in his development as the aims of the Society made possible and at the same time it was confronted with the fact that unless it put greater emphasis on achievement versus promise in this time of thriving graduate schools and research institutions, it would be threatened by a loss of caste and prestige among those who realize what achievement means in science. The solution to the attainment of these two vital objects of the Society was seen in the revision of the Constitution which permits chapters to limit full membership to graduate students and faculty members who have already carried out research work and to grant associate membership to undergraduate students of special promise and attainments which make for research. Dr. Williston was a staunch advocate of this change in the constitution and those familiar with the evolution of this instrument will recognize in the forceful passages emphasizing research *achievement* his influence, indeed his actual wording.

In this development of the Society, Dr. Williston saw also the means for accomplishing the last of his farseeing hopes, the extension of chapters to all the productive research units of the country, large or small, university or college, technical school or institute of technology: with the condition that the smaller institutes, which have no graduate schools, would, if granted chapters, limit full membership to faculty members and elect undergraduates to associate membership only, which would be converted into full membership if the promise were converted after graduation into attainment and achievement in research, the way, it seemed to Dr. Williston, would be at last clear for extending our organization rapidly throughout the smaller institutions in the country without danger to its high ideals and to the insistence on productive work which must henceforth be our motto, if we are to maintain our standing among the great research movements of the present age.

The writer had the rare privilege of being closely associated with Dr. Williston and indeed owed to him the kindling of his own deep interest in the Society. He often conferred with Dr. Williston on the future of the Society and as to the steps which it would be wise to advocate. And to the last our great leader whom we have now lost, saw in his inspired vision the day coming when the Society would be flourishing throughout the country, with a chapter in every worthy institution large or small, and reaching out indeed for the extension of its growth to foreign countries, especially to Canada and to England—for research and science are international and truth the greatest blessing mankind could hope for. Such was the great and simple faith of Samuel Wendell Williston.

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